

CONNECT First Responders Act

Bill Summary

Sponsor: Rep. Nita M. Lowey

The Connecting the Operations of National Networks of Emergency Communications Technologies for First Responders Act of 2004—the *CONNECT First Responders Act*—will significantly enhance the federal government’s efforts to achieve communications interoperability nationwide by: (1) creating and fully authorizing the Office of Wireless Public Safety Interoperable Communications within the Department of Homeland Security, and giving this Office the authority and annual budget to work with federal, state, local stakeholders to develop and implement a national strategy to achieve interoperability; and (2) establishing a new grant program dedicated to achieving communication interoperability nationwide.

- **Creation of the Department Of Homeland Security Office of Wireless Public Safety Interoperable Communications**

The CONNECT First Responders Act addresses the disjointed Federal approach to achieving interoperable communications by creating a single organization in the Department of Homeland Security, with a robust annual budget, to address and resolve interoperability issues: the Office of Wireless Public Safety Interoperable Communications. Reporting to the Under Secretary for Science and Technology, this new office will: (1) provide overall coordination with all Federal agencies that provide funding, research, technology development, and other support for interoperability; (2) encourage and facilitate the development of flexible and open architectures and standards for short- and long-term solutions to interoperability; (3) facilitate collaborative planning among, and provide technical assistance to, Federal, state, and local public safety agencies; and (4) develop and implement a national strategy for achieving communications interoperability. The bill authorizes \$50 million for fiscal year 2005 for the administration of this office, more than double the amount requested by the Administration—government-wide—in fiscal year 2005 (\$22 million).

- **Authorization of Interoperable Communications Technology Grant Program**

The CONNECT First Responders Act recognizes that achieving nationwide interoperability requires significant financial commitments at all levels of government. Like the Assistance to Firefighters Grant Program, the bill authorizes the Secretary to make direct grants to local governments and public safety agencies, and also authorizes grants to state governments. All grant applicants must complete and submit an interoperable communications plan that can address any aspect of the communications system life cycle, including: planning, system design and engineering; procurement and installation of equipment; operations and maintenance of equipment; and testing and technology development. In awarding grants, the Secretary shall consider, among other factors, the location, risk, or vulnerability of critical infrastructure and key national assets; the nature of the threat to the jurisdiction; and the extent of partnerships established between local jurisdictions. Recognizing that achieving interoperable communications is shared responsibility among Federal, state, and local governments, the bill institutes a 75 percent federal/25 percent state or local cost share for the grant program, but also allows for in-kind matching of grant funds. The bill authorizes \$5 billion over five years (fiscal years 2005 – 2009) for the grant program, and escalates the authorization level each year, in order to: (1) facilitate the immediate acquisition of short-term communications equipment to link existing communications infrastructures; and (2) initiate the development of comprehensive interoperable communications plans prior to more extensive equipment purchases in the latter years of the program.